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RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 3562
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 3972
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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN ALLIES SEEK "CANCELLATION" OF UNSCR 1559

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Syria's allies in Lebanon have launched a campaign for the "cancellation" of UN Security Council resolution 1559. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri claimed to the Ambassador that following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the election of Michel Sleiman as president, there is no longer any reason for the resolution. Foreign Minister Ali El Chami added that the issue of militia weapons is a domestic issue outside the purview of the international community. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Saad Hariri has asked the Ambassador for "ongoing U.S. support" for UNSCR 1559, and he predicted that the March 8 alliance will probably raise the issue in the cabinet. Hariri advisor Mohamad Chatah explained that Lebanon is seeking to avoid provoking Syria by calling for a broader interpretation of the resolution, including Israeli violations that would otherwise be covered by UNSCR 1701. The pressure on Hariri will likely increase as the May renewal of UNSCR 1559 draws nearer. End Summary.

SYRIA'S ALLIES SAY 1559 NO LONGER NEEDED

¶2. (C) Syria's allies in Lebanon have launched a campaign for the "cancellation" of UN Security Council resolution 1559. The campaign was initiated by editorialists in opposition-aligned newspapers, but it was quickly picked up by Minister of State Adnan as-Sayyed Hussein, the Shia minister in President Sleiman's ministerial bloc, and other, primarily Shia officials. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri explained his logic to the Ambassador and visiting Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Frederic Hof on December 17. Berri said that following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and the election of Michel Sleiman as president in 2008, there is no longer any reason for UNSCR 1559. The issue of militia arms is covered by UNSCR 1701, he claimed, and he wants to "kill" UNSCR 1559 because UNSCR 1701 is the first resolution to mention the Shebaa Farms.

¶3. (C) Berri's comments were echoed and expanded by his appointee, new Foreign Minister Ali El Chami. El Chami asserted to the Ambassador and Hof the same day that the issue of Hizballah's weapons is a domestic issue confined to the National Dialogue. As for the arms of Palestinian militias, he said, they are connected to resolving the Palestinian question. Neither one, he said, should be in the purview of the international community.

HARIRI UNDER PRESSURE TO DEFEND 1559

¶4. (C) Prime Minister Saad Hariri asked for "ongoing U.S. support" for UNSCR 1559 in a meeting with the Ambassador and Hof on December 18. Hariri predicted that the March 8 alliance would continue to pressure him to request the resolution's "cancellation," and his foes would probably raise it in the cabinet. Hariri said he would address Hizballah privately on the topic, but he defended the resolution on two bases: firstly, Hariri claimed that the second clause of UNSCR 1559 (the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon) applied to the Israeli occupation of Ghajar and the Shebaa Farms, not just the former Syrian occupation. Secondly, he argued that the third clause (the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias) applied to Palestinian militias, in addition to Hizballah. French Ambassador Denis Pietton, who met with Hariri on December 21 after his visit to Damascus, relayed to the Ambassador the same day that Hariri urged the French to stop framing UNSCR 1559 as a Syrian issue and focus instead on the specific clauses, whichever party may be violating them.

¶5. (C) Hariri's foreign policy advisor Mohamad Chatah further outlined the debate in Hariri's camp on UNSCR 1559 to the Ambassador and Hof earlier on December 18. UNSCR 1559 had the potential to be the first major political issue in the council of ministers, he said. Chatah reported that on December 16, the Syrian mission to the UN had approached the Lebanese mission to request coordination on the issue of the budget of the Special Envoy for the Secretary-General for the implementation of UNSCR 1559. Chatah predicted that if Syria failed to cut off funding for the special envoy in the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly, it might seek to use the Non-Aligned Movement bloc in the General Assembly to continue its fight. Although the cabinet had issued no guidance to Permanent Representative Nawwaf Salaam, Lebanon's position on the issue was important, Chatah maintained. If Lebanon were to actively promote UNSCR 1559, it would provoke Syria. The GOL response thus far, he explained, was to call for a broader interpretation of the resolution, including Israeli violations that would otherwise be covered by UNSCR ¶1701. Such a strategy worked in 2009, he pointed out. Chatah argued for retaining UNSCR 1559 as a guarantee against foreign interference by all external parties, not just Syria, and he claimed that such a justification sells well in Lebanon.

DEMARCHE ON UNGA FIFTH COMMITTEE DELIVERED

¶6. (C) The Ambassador raised with Chatah on December 21 concerns about Syrian attempts to call a vote in the Fifth Committee of the UNGA on funding for the UN's political work in Lebanon and asked that the GOL instruct its mission in New York not to support this Syrian attempt. Chatah reported that the issue of UNSCR 1559 will likely go to both the president and the prime minister and noted that the topic "is becoming a problem." Chatah also noted that he had spoken with the Lebanese permrep on this matter.

¶7. (C) Comment: The Hariri camp's attempt to protect UNSCR 1559 by broadening its interpretation to encompass Israel will be a hard sell to Syria's allies. The opposition is clearly focused on defining militia arms -- particularly those of Hizballah -- as a domestic issue, and they claim the new Lebanese government's openness to Syria indicates that there is no need for international resolutions that impugn Syria, even indirectly. While the opposition is energized, Hariri remains in a defensive posture. The pressure on him will likely increase as the May renewal of UNSCR 1559 draws nearer, particularly since Lebanon is currently scheduled to hold the presidency of the UNSC then.

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